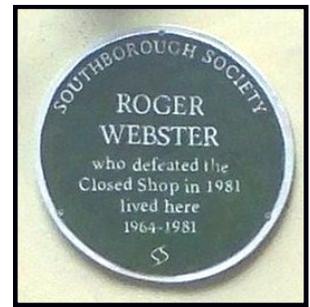


Roger Webster - Activist

By Maxwell Macfarlane

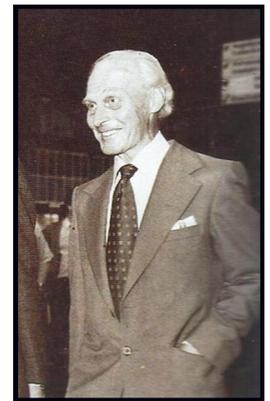
Location of plaque - The Oast House, Pennington Road, Southborough.



Ronald Roger Webster, latterly always known as Roger, was born in Southampton on 1 October 1914. Little is known of his early life until the Second World War, when he served in the Royal Artillery until being invalided out some time before D-Day, 6 June 1944. He then served in Air Intelligence where, by complete accident, whilst acting as a duty officer somewhere in Whitehall, he found and read a mislaid cablegram which recorded the final plans for the invasion of Europe, weeks before the event. He was placed under surveillance to avoid leaking any information.

After the War, he worked for a manufacturing company and became general manager but, after resigning, events led him to join British Rail on a temporary basis in 1957, then permanently on 18 March 1958, as an administrator when he was assigned to an exercise concerning the renewal of a proposal for a Channel Tunnel. At the same time, he became very aware of and increasingly disturbed by the so-called “Spanish practices” of many trade unionists.

In 1963, he and his wife, Joan, saw a derelict Kentish oast-house in Southborough, occupied only by cows and goats. The lady owner of the land was in financial difficulties. He paid her £4,100 for the dismal old building and three quarters of an acre of land. They moved into a room upstairs after making it just habitable. The cows and goats were moved out about a week later. During the next ten years, they did 99% of the reconstruction work themselves. That house became “The Roundels”, now “The Oast House”. Meanwhile, he helped found the Southborough Society in 1969 and was Hon. Secretary between 1970 and 1971.



**Roger Webster
photographed in
the mid 1970s**

On 25 June 1970, he was advised by his BR employer that he must join a railway union or face dismissal, following the introduction of a “Closed Shop”. Although his original contract of employment stated that he had the right to belong or not to belong to a union, the small print said that his terms of employment were subject to such changes as might be negotiated by management and unions at any time. He appealed successfully against this on the grounds of “conscience”. Then a Conservative government was elected and the Industrial Relations Act (1971) was endorsed by Parliament. The right not to belong to a union now seemed firmly to be embedded in law.

On 25 June 1970, he was advised by his BR employer that he must join a railway union or face dismissal, following the introduction of a “Closed Shop”. Although his original contract of employment stated that he had the right to belong or not to belong to a union, the small print said that his terms of employment were subject to such changes as might be negotiated by management and unions at any time. He appealed successfully against this on the grounds of “conscience”. Then a Conservative government was elected and the Industrial Relations Act (1971) was endorsed by Parliament. The right not to belong to a union now seemed firmly to be embedded in law.

On 25 June 1970, he was advised by his BR employer that he must join a railway union or face dismissal, following the introduction of a “Closed Shop”. Although his original contract of employment stated that he had the right to belong or not to belong to a union, the small print said that his terms of employment were subject to such changes as might be negotiated by management and unions at any time. He appealed successfully against this on the grounds of “conscience”. Then a Conservative government was elected and the Industrial Relations Act (1971) was endorsed by Parliament. The right not to belong to a union now seemed firmly to be embedded in law.

However, the crisis came with the introduction by Michael Foot, then Employment Secretary under Harold Wilson, of the Trades Union and Labour Relations Acts of 1974 and 1975, which effectively blocked all lawful exits from trades union membership. British Rail, as a state-run enterprise, lost no time in announcing a “Closed Shop”. This time his appeal failed and his employment with BR was terminated with effect from 28 August 1976.

Webster and his friends had no wish to be imprisoned within such a draconian system. He immediately wrote and circulated 3,500 copies of a letter explaining the iniquities of the closed shop to MPs, members of the House of Lords, the Institute of Directors etc. He was adamant that, if a remedy could not be found in British law, he would seek one out at the European Court of Human Rights at Strasbourg.

His case was taken up by the National Association for Freedom (NAFF), now The Freedom Association, which made available resources and access to expert legal advice as necessary to proceed with the case. The story of his action, with two colleagues, I.M.Young and N.H.James, is so complicated that it cannot easily be summarised in a small space. Webster himself wrote a very personal account of its ups and downs, published privately in 2000. Suffice to say that NAFF’s case on behalf of BR’s closed shop victims against the British Government went before the European Court of Human Rights in May 1979 and on 13 August 1981 at Strasbourg the President of the Court pronounced its judgement in favour of NAFF and the three railwaymen.



Greg Clark MP unveiling the commemorative plaque at Roger Webster's former home.

Though over 400 victims of closed shop sackings between 1974 and 1980 shared £2million in compensation, Webster, Young and James were liable for unpaid costs of up to £40,000, the difference between legal costs incurred and the costs awarded by the Court. Although the problem of costs was resolved, largely by donations, the three men got nothing. For Webster, who was left virtually penniless, this meant selling “The Roundels” and moving to Burwash, East Sussex, where he spent his retirement.

Roger Webster died of bronchopneumonia on 30 March 2003 at Uckfield Hospital.

The Society’s plaque commemorating Roger Webster’s was unveiled by the Tunbridge Wells MP Greg Clark in July 2013.